FOURTH CHURCH PULPIT
NOVEMBER 17, 2002

HIGH-RISK VENTURE
John M. Buchanan

Jesus was a great universe-disturber. Those of us who try to follow his Way have a choice, either to go with him as universe-disturbers or to play it safe. If we play it safe, we have to settle for a comfortable religion, one which will not permit questions, because questions are universe-disturbers.... Every new scientific discovery about the nature of the universe has shaken one religious group or another, and yet the new discoveries do nothing to alter the nature of the universe; they simply force us to grow in our understanding and our love for the Creator of all.

Madeleine L'Engle
A Stone for a Pillow

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A LIGHT IN THE CITY

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JOHN M. BUCHANAN, PASTOR
FOURTH PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

Matthew 25:14-30

"You have been trustworthy in a few things,
I will put you in charge of many things."
Matthew 25:21 (NRSV)

Startle us, O God, with your truth and open our hearts and minds to your word.
O God, you have given us the precious gift of our lives. So teach us to live them fully,
to invest them in the work of love, which is the work of your kingdom,
through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

I decided to approach this familiar story about the wealthy man who entrusts his property to three servants differently this time. So I called a friend of mine who is an investment manager. "I have a question," I said. "Go ahead," he responded, "but make it quick, I'm busy." He knew, of course, that I was not about to become an important client. So I said, "Say someone gave me a lot of money, several hundred thousand dollars, and say I wanted to double my money. How would I go about that?" There was a silence during which I presumed he was thinking exactly what I was thinking, namely that this isn't the best of times for investors and investment managers and that everyone and every not-for-profit enterprise with any money at all invested in the market is trying to figure out how to cope—not with huge profits, but the opposite, the significant diminishment of personal and institutional wealth as a result of investing it. Finally he spoke. "How much time do we have to work with? How long before you need to double your money?" "Not too long," I said. "Say a few years." So he told me about the Rule of 72, which was way more than I wanted to know. "If your investment has a guaranteed interest rate say of 5 percent," he explained, "you divide the interest rate into 72 and the answer will be the number of years it will take to double your money. Five percent into 72 equals 14-1/2 years."

"So how risky is this?" I asked, and he answered, "Plenty. If you want to double your money quickly, the risk escalates dramatically. In fact, in the world of risk venture capital, only one out of four or five ventures makes it. The other times you lose." "By the way," he went on, "why are you asking me this?"

And so I told him it was in the Bible, a story that was the text for this Sunday's sermon. "Oh," he said, "I thought you might have come into some real money. There are actually some marvelous opportunities right now. Don't quote me. I gotta get back to work now."

Jesus told this story in the middle of his own personal high-risk venture. It was during the last few days of his life. Earlier he had made a high-risk decision to leave the safety of rural Galilee, where he was among his own people and where crowds of people welcomed him wherever he went and listened intently to what he had to say. He decided to leave the safety of Galilee and go to Jerusalem, the capital city, where the religious authorities would not listen intently but would regard him as a threat to the status quo and their own power and prerogatives, and the Romans—the provincial governor himself moved to the city once a year, during Passover—the Romans would surely regard him as a disturber of the peace. Jerusalem would be crawling with Roman soldiers. It was not a good time to go. His friends tried to talk him out of it. And now that they were there, the worst seemed to be happening. He had stirred up a crowd of poor people, who had a kind of noisy street demonstration when he entered the city. And to make matters infinitely worse, he had gone to the temple, there was an altercation, and he apparently physically assaulted the moneychangers. The religious authorities were already talking to the Roman officials about getting rid of him. And it is at that very moment that he told them a story.

It is about a wealthy man who goes away on a long journey. Before he departs, he distributes his property to three slaves. It is a great deal of money. The first slave takes the money to the market, to a wealth management firm, invests in high-risk ventures. The second slave does the same thing, puts the money to work and at high risk. Both do very well. Both reap the rewards of the Rule of 72. When their master returns, he is very pleased. "Well done," he says. And then he promises that they will receive more responsibility in the future.

The third slave takes a very different approach with his money, his one talent. He hid it in the ground, dug a hole and put it all in for safekeeping. And I couldn't help but ponder the irony that if we all would have done that two years ago, we'd be feeling pretty smug right now.

This is not a bad man. This is, in fact, a prudent, careful, cautious investor. He knows that his master is harsh and unforgiving. He's seen his master gobble up the assets and life savings of little people without a second thought. He's not about to take chances with the money. No way. So he buries it. And it's all there, every penny of it, when his master returns. The slave felt good about it. He was proud of himself. "Here it is. All of it, safe and sound." And for his efforts he is treated as harshly as anyone in the whole Bible. His master doesn't compliment him for his prudence and his caution but calls him wicked, lazy, takes the money away and distributes it to the other two; calls him worthless and unceremoniously kicks him out of the of house, off the property.

It's just a story, of course, and these parables of Jesus, we are told, mostly have a single point, but I can't help wondering how it would have turned out had the first two slaves invested and lost, put the money in a high-risk venture and lost it all. Jesus didn't tell it that way, of course, but I can't help but imagine that the master would have been far less harsh, might even have applauded the effort because the point here is not really about doubling your money and accumulating wealth. It's about living. It's about investing. It's about taking risks. It's about himself and what he has done and what is about to happen to him. And mostly it's about what he hopes and expects of them after he's gone. It's about being a follower of Jesus and what it means to be faithful to him and so, finally, it's about you and me.

The greatest risk of all, it turns out, is not to risk anything, is not to care deeply and profoundly enough about anything to invest deeply, to give your heart away, and in that process risk everything. The greatest risk of all, it turns out, is to play it safe, to live cautiously and prudently.

After the Second World War, as the world was slowly trying to come to grips with the unthinkable horrors of the Holocaust, the scholarly community went to work trying to figure out how it was possible. What happened? How did a civilized people, a culture that produced some of the finest minds and creative spirits in Western civilization—J. S. Bach, Brahms, Beethoven, Goethe, Schiller, and Martin Luther—how could this culture also produce or allow Auschwitz and Buchenwald? One of those scholars, Hannah Arendt, wrote a book about one of the most perplexing figures in the Nazi hierarchy, Adolph Eichman. She called her book *The Banality of Evil.* Eichman didn't seem like a monster. He was terrifyingly ordinary. His job was simply to make the transportation system work as effectively as possible: to transport people from one place to another—from their home to concentration camps. He simply went to work every day, minded his own business, and did his job.

Harvard theologian Harvey Cox once observed that Adolph Eichman is a terrifying figure because he was so overpoweringly ordinary. In an essay he wrote a long time ago, but which I have never forgotten, Cox proposed that the human dilemma is not simply that we are proud and think too highly of ourselves, but that we don't think highly enough, don't reach far enough, or care deeply enough, or invest enough of ourselves. Orthodox, conventional theology identifies sin as pride and egotism. Martin Luther said the human self turns in upon itself. That's true, I believe. But Cox gives us an entire other lens through which to view the human condition. It's called sloth, one of the ancient church's seven deadly sins. Sloth means not caring, not loving, not rejoicing, not living up to the full potential of our humanity, playing it safe, investing nothing, cautious, prudent, digging a hole and burying the money in the ground.

How important is this? Historians observe that whenever totalitarianism of any kind rears its ugly head, it's because ordinary people have stopped caring about the life of the community and the nation. We have something like an epidemic of that at this moment in our country. There were some parts of our nation where only 30 percent of the eligible voters took the trouble to go to the polls and vote. Our national average was 39 percent. The vote was close nationwide, and so it means that no more than 20 percent of the voters of this country get to decide who governs and how, regardless of what party wins. Interviews afterwards, particularly with younger voters who stayed away from the polls in record numbers, turned up a kind of lackadaisical unconcern, a new cynicism about the political process. "It's all corrupt; it's all in the hands of big money, big lobbies, and special interest groups with enormous resources. What can I do? Why bother? Why get invested in it?"

And I thought about the two survivors of the oppressive totalitarianism of the former Soviet Union, author Alexander Solzhenitsyn who lived through years in the gulag and afterwards wrote: "Mankind's sole salvation lies in everyone making everything his business." And Vaclav Havel, a writer who spent time in prison as a dissident and then after the collapse of the communist state was elected President of the new Czech Republic, "The salvation of this human

world lies nowhere else than in the human heart . . . in human responsibility. Responsibility to something higher than my family, my time, my country, my success." President Havel made those remarks to a joint session of the United States Congress.

And I thought again, as I often do, about Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a martyr, executed by the Nazis a few days before the end of the Second World War. Bonhoeffer said, "The sin of respectable people is running from responsibility." As you know, Bonhoeffer, who was a pacifist, took his own responsibility so seriously he joined the resistance and helped plan an assassination attempt on Hitler's life. His sense of responsibility cost him his life.

How important is this personally, in terms of how you and I live our lives? Jesus' warning is that the outcome of playing it safe, not caring, not loving passionately, not investing yourself, not risking anything, is something akin to death, like being banished to the outer darkness.

I love the way Madeleine L'Engle put that, almost as if she were writing yesterday. She recalled a line from T. S. Eliot's J. Alfred Prufrock, "Do I dare disturb the universe?" L'Engle calls Jesus a "universe-disturber," observes that it got him crucified, and that to follow his way is to be a universe-disturber, to ask, "Dare I be one?" "It's a question we need to ask with courage," she says, "as we look at what's going on around us in the world with wars in the name of religion accelerating all over the planet, each group claiming to represent the Truth, and occasionally proclaiming it with acts of terrorism" (*A Stone for a Pillow,* p. 84). Playing it safe, Madeleine L'Engle says, "leads to personal diminishment and death." That's how personally important this is.

Now, for most of us, religion, our personal faith, has not seemed like a high-risk venture. In fact, it has seemed to be something like the opposite. Faith has seemed to be a personal comfort zone. Faith, we think, is about personal security, here and in the hereafter. Faith, we think, is no more risky than believing ideas in our heads about God and Jesus, a list of beliefs to which we more or less subscribe intellectually. Faith, we think—because that's what we've been taught—is getting your personal theology right and then living a good life by avoiding bad things. Religion, we think, is a pretty timid, non-risky venture.

I suspect that's pretty much what Jesus' friends thought too. And I imagine they were as stunned by this peculiar story when they thought about it as we are. It's about him, of course. He took the precious gift of his 33-year-old life, and out of his love for God, his passionate love for the kingdom of God, his deep and passionate love for his nation and his neighbors, put his life on the line, invested it all, holding nothing back, risking everything by coming to Jerusalem.

And he was talking about the 12 of them, sitting there wishing nothing so much as that they were back in the friendly security of Galilee, wishing with everything in them that he hadn't risked so much, secretly planning, I suspect, that if somehow they got out of there alive, to head north, just as quickly as possible, back to their homes, and the security of the rolling hills and little villages, back to their fishing boats.

And it was at least in part this story, I think, that started to turn them around. It was this little story that got them to thinking that the way to be faithful to him and to his vision of the kingdom of God was to invest their own lives, not to scurry for safety, but to plunge ahead, to take chances to speak out, to go public, to put it all on the line. I suspect that it was this story that helped them see that in him, investing it all in his kingdom, they were suddenly, wondrously alive.

And so it is finally his bidding, his invitation to you and me. He invites us to be his disciples, to live our lives as fully as possible by investing them, by risking, by expanding the horizons of our responsibilities. To be his man or woman, he said, is not so much believing ideas about him as it is following him. It is a conversion of heart and mind and also our worldview, our outlook, and our behavior. It is to experience renewed responsibility for the use and investment of these precious lives of ours. It is to know yourself as responsible for the lives of those dear to you and the life of the community and nation and the world. It is to be bold and brave, to reach high and care deeply. It is to hurt when brothers and sisters hurt, to be impatient and angry at injustice, to weep at the world's brokenness and rejoice at its goodness and beauty.

I love something George Bernard Shaw wrote in *Man and Superman:* "This is the true joy in life, the being used for a purpose recognized by yourself as a mighty one; the being a force of nature instead of a feverish selfish little clod of ailments and grievances complaining that the world will not devote itself to making you happy."

And then Shaw looked ahead to that time of completion and ending, the time of summing up which we all will face one day: "I want to be thoroughly used up when I die, for the harder I work the more I live. I rejoice in life for its own sake. Like is no 'brief candle' to me. It is a sort of splendid torch which I have got hold of for the moment, and I want to make it burn as brightly as possible before handing it on to future generations."

And so the invitation to the adventure of faith: the high-risk venture of being a disciple of Jesus Christ.

All praise to him.

Amen.